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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 5876
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 3912
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9346
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 1987
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0142
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 6422
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4364
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000337

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STATE FOR OIE DANIEL SINGER AND REBECCA S DALEY
STATE FOR SA/INS

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SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA - SRI LANKA UPDATE FOLLOWING INDIA
OUTBREAK

REF: A) COLOMBO 1992, B) COLOMBO 1592, C) KAUFFELD EMAIL TO
KATHERINE CRAWFORD FEB 10, 2005

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The avian flu (AI) outbreak in nearby India has generated significant publicity in Sri Lanka, with public concern leading to decreased consumption of poultry products. Little change has taken place since November (Ref A) in the pace of preparations by the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL), other than the banning of poultry imports and chicken feed from India. Improvements in surveillance and detection capabilities continue to be limited by a lack of resources, and surveillance problems are exacerbated in areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). End Summary.

Perceptions About Avian Flu

12. (SBU) Reftel cables and earlier news articles reported that GSL officials were confident in their AI preparedness plan. But concerns remain about logistical and diagnostic shortcomings in the plan as well as a failure to make AI preparedness a budget priority. Media coverage of AI has intensified since the Indian outbreak, with some articles describing Sri Lanka's preparedness shortcomings, others giving false reassurance to the public of Sri Lanka's supposed immunity to AI (based on SARS not coming to the island), and still others emphasizing the continued safety of poultry consumption, a widely used protein source in Sri Lanka. The GSL continues to work toward fulfillment of its national preparedness plan, but implementation remains hindered by a lack of resources.

Status of Wildlife Surveillance

13. (SBU) According to Dr. Samson Daniel, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Livestock, five investigation centers

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equipped with rapid testing kits are capable of conducting initial tests, but samples suspected of carrying H5N1 must be sent to the Veterinary Research Institute (VRI) in the Central Province. Because the VRI lacks the proper facilities for virus isolation, the GSL would like to construct a more modern, adequate facility. Daniel said that the Ministry of Livestock and Ministry of Health are preparing a joint AI surveillance and pandemic prevention proposal, which they will use to request assistance from donors in the near future.

¶4. (SBU) Daniel confirmed that carrying out surveillance in LTTE-controlled areas of the north and east is especially difficult due to the LTTE presence, staff aversion to working in LTTE-controlled areas, and the generally poor state of infrastructure in these war-torn areas.

¶5. (SBU) Daniel also acknowledged that little information exists on the number and whereabouts of backyard poultry farmers. He suspects low levels of awareness about AI among this group. Most educational campaigns have targeted the organized poultry sector stakeholders, such as processors and large-scale commercial farms, leaving thousands of small-scale farmers out of the loop. Papers report that 300 wild birds have been tested to date, with no sign of infection.

Preparations for a Human Pandemic

¶6. (SBU) Sri Lanka still lacks the ability to detect H5N1 in humans. On February 27, Dr. Bipin Verma and Dr. Agostino Borra, representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO), updated EconOff on efforts to upgrade Sri Lanka's capability to diagnose H5N1 with 99% accuracy. USAID

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Colombo has requested \$479,500 to support this project (Ref C). The WHO is currently sponsoring two officials for specialized training in Hong Kong and hopes to acquire more rapid diagnostic kits for distribution in district hospitals.

¶7. (U) Verma and Borra reported WHO's efforts to partner with other UN agencies, such as UNICEF, to increase public awareness of AI symptoms and mitigation measures. (Note: Such campaigns are needed, as most reports indicate little knowledge of H5N1 and its potential threat in the countryside. End Note.)

Falling Demand for Poultry after India Announces AI

¶8. Since the outbreak in India, the Sri Lankan Poultry Association has reported a 10 percent drop in poultry consumption. Egg prices have dropped 50 percent and chicken prices around 35 percent.

¶9. Sri Lanka, which had already banned poultry imports from bird-flu infected nations, has now restricted maize imports (a primary chicken feed in Sri Lanka) from India. (NOTE: The logic and effectiveness of this measure is not clear. End Note.) With India supplying around 90% of the maize used for poultry-feed, the GSL must decide quickly whether to begin importing feed from other countries before supplies run out.

¶10. COMMENT: Increased awareness of the nearby AI threat in India has mainly resulted in a ban on poultry imports and a reduction in poultry consumption. The GSL needs significant aid in order to improve its diagnostic capabilities as it still lacks the ability to confirm the presence of H5N1. US assistance for lab equipment and capacity building in diagnostic skills (requested in Ref C) would greatly contribute to Sri Lanka's ability to detect an outbreak.

LUNSTEAD